

White House Tour Rules 'Ridiculous'

By Ethan Wallison

ROLL CALL STAFF

Rep. John Olver (D-Mass.) didn't have a great deal of spirit invested when he asked Bush administration officials to explain the White House tour policy at a recent hearing. But the answer got him a little worked up.

"I didn't realize that the White House had become the property of

the military," Olver grouched later that day. "I mean, who do they think we're going to be sending over there? This is ridiculous."

The focus of Olver's frustration was a White House guideline that made active-duty servicemen one of only four categories of tourists that would be admitted for group tours.

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Members Irked by Rules for White House Tours

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In fact, the rules — they also permit tours for school and youth groups, as well as veterans groups — have been in place since last summer. All group tours were suspended during the war in Iraq.

But as the White House reopened its gates to public tours on Tuesday, it also reignited questions about security policies that many Members consider overly restrictive and arbitrary — even if they know little else about how group tours come about.

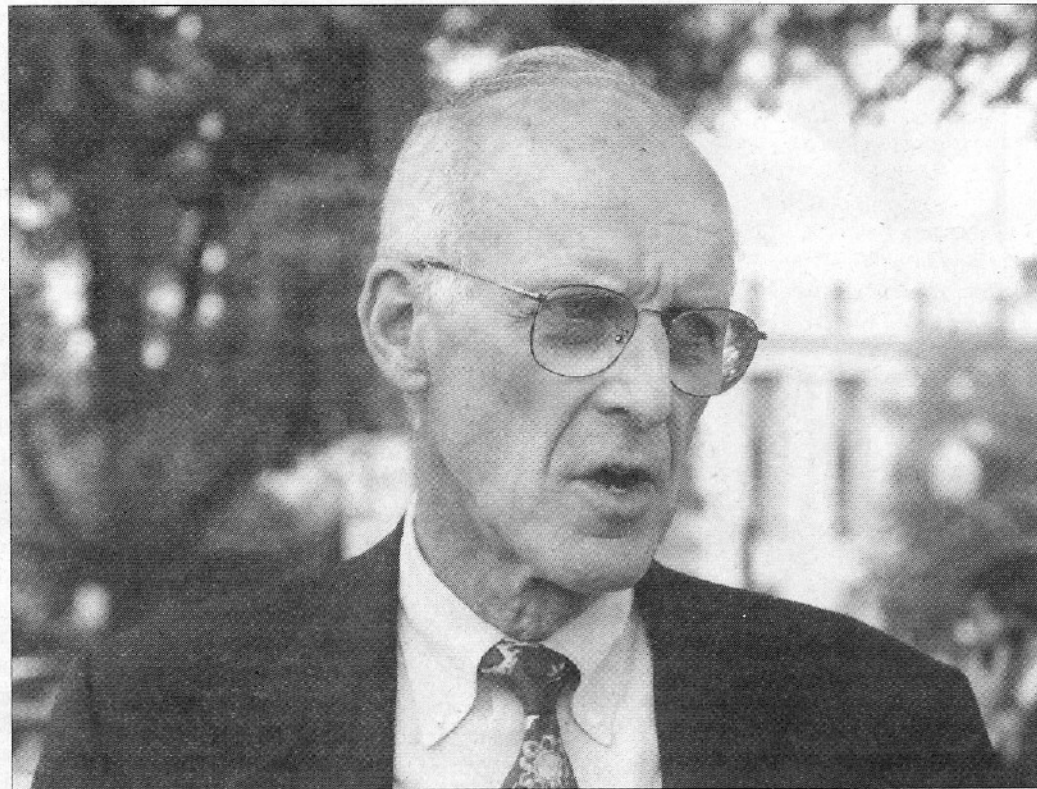
“I didn’t know about it, but I’m already annoyed,” Rep. Tom Allen (D-Maine) said.

Congressional offices have always been keen to arrange group tours of the White House, in large part because such visits are one of the few perks that can be provided to constituents when they are in town.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, however, Members have mostly had to make do with gallery tickets and flags, which can be purchased by constituents through their Congressional offices.

The White House tour rules are susceptible to unusual scenarios. For instance, a minyan of rabbis would be excluded, unless they are also military veterans. Nuns may be out of luck. And Boy Scouts over age 15 would first need to produce valid photo identification.

One Capitol Hill scheduler said that when the White House announced that group tours could resume she was inundated with requests from folks who did not realize that only particular segments of the public were welcome.



File Photo

Rep. John Olver doesn’t understand why White House group tours are limited to four special groups, including veterans: “I mean, who do they think we’re going to be sending over there? This is ridiculous.”

The scheduler said that when she explained the situation, many responded, “Well, that’s not what I read in the news” or “That’s not what I heard on TV.”

White House spokeswoman Ashley Snee said the White House, along with the Secret Service and the National Park Service, is continuing to “monitor” the situation, suggesting the standards may evolve over time.

“We hope that all tours can resume,” Snee said. “But the safety of those who live and work in the White House, as well as those who visit the White House, is the primary concern.”

Meanwhile, Snee pointed out, Members or their spouses are allowed to bring any group — no larger than six persons — to the White House for tours. Only the standard background checks are needed.

Members don’t appear to be universally impressed with that option either, however.

“It’s an incredible waste of a Member’s time,” Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) said. “And I’ve told [the White House] this. It just doesn’t make sense that you can’t send a chief of staff or [a legislative director] down there.”

While security concerns are cited, the preponderance of the evidence suggests the Bush White House has never cottoned to the open-door concept. Schedulers on Capitol Hill recall, for example, that in the earliest days of the administration the allotment of tickets made available to offices was slashed by a third.

One Democratic lawmaker remembered the fracas that erupted in 2001 around the annual White House barbecue, which was to have occurred Sept. 11, when the administration tried to impose new restrictions on attendance. Members were told they could bring only one guest, but no children.

Faced with protests from Capitol Hill, the White House finally acquiesced and permitted families to attend. But in recalling the event, the Member saw the first flowering of a curious pattern: the White House failing to seize opportunities to generate goodwill from the Congress.

“They never seem to miss an opportunity to screw things up,” the Member said.

For the time being, the more influential Members don’t seem inclined to tinker.

“The tourism aspects always take a back seat to security,” said Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.), who chairs the subcommittee that oversees White House appropriations.